

Developing a 21st century art collection in a global context

What I'd like to do over the next 30 minutes is consider some of the issues that collaborations between the contemporary arts and anthropology raise for museums and galleries like National Museums Liverpool. I'm not necessarily going to be dealing with the fundamentals of pure research and the exchange of research practice, but in fact the tangible results of practice, the object. I will be basing this paper within a South Asian context, which is due to my own specialism in this area, but also much of what I reflect on during this paper, firmly took hold during an Arts Council trip to Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in December 2005. In particular I will explore what has been described as 'border crossings' by Schneider and Wright within a predominately South Asian context and discuss the issues of trying to apply western concepts of art and anthropology practice onto a practice or practitioner that does not wish to conform to a particular code of classification. Finally my concluding thoughts will, as of yet, be without conclusion, but I will reveal ways in which curators from the traditional departments of fine art, decorative art and ethnology are now opening up dialogues internally and externally, which will hopefully result in a more accurate representation of art practices held in the respective collections of National Museum Liverpool.

In some cases museum and gallery collections may be the last stop on the line for the outcomes of a number of the migratory practices, which will be discussed over the next two days, so I would like to begin this paper by provided the historical context for the difficulties faced by museums today in relation to the placing and defining of migratory practice, within its permanent

collections. Using a multi-disciplinary organisation like National Museums Liverpool as an example I hope to shed some light on the historical reasoning for the segregation of collections at NML and the enduring colonial connotations inherited by the curator working in a post colonial world.

The strong colonial attitudes of National Museums Liverpool have left a difficult legacy for today's museum curator, whether they be arts or ethnography based. The defining and separating of practice, which laid the foundations for the collecting and cataloguing processes adopted by museum staff are well over 150 years old, but shockingly they still govern how and what we collect. The classification systems set down in the 19th century facilitated the partition of art and craft practices from the west and what Gulammohammed Sheikh describes as art and craft practices on the periphery of western understanding i.e. the rest of the world. This fundamentally created the presumption that Western art or the high arts were concerned with the urban educated practices of painting and sculpture, and the urban industrial arts including textiles, ceramics, glass and metalwork, while ethnography was concerned with the periphery or the low arts concerned with what Gulammohammed Sheikh describes in his piece for the SHISHA publication ArtSouthAsia as the rural/tribal object defined as 'pre modern' or 'traditional', I would like to add the concept of hereditary practice to this definition and its close association with the term 'traditional. This labelling of place and practice automatically provided the hierarchical classification of objects that is alive and well today.



[Walker Art Gallery Sculpture Gallery]

This is born out in museum displays and exhibitions, with the Western history of Fine Arts and Decorative arts at the Walker Art Gallery, focusing on key 'movements' and prized individual artists who conveniently fit within the skewed western view of world art.



[Tibet display WML]

While the World Cultures gallery at World Museum, geographically focuses on the carvings, textiles, costume and domestic items associated with the communities colonial collectors strived to record for a Western audience back home. In fact for the most part we know more about the Western collectors undertaking the collecting than we do the individual responsible for creating the object. The displays place us within a 'time limbo', on first glance it would be unclear to the visitor if these displays represented the past or the present, there is little sense of progression or development, or that nebulous idea of the modern. Behind the scenes the colonial legacy is just as strong with art department curators responsible for aspects of the fine art canon, including British painting, sculpture and watercolours, while the ethnology curator is responsible for Asia an enormously complex and layered continent that is

impossible for one curator to every properly research or represent. You may be thinking 'ah' but the fine art department must have many more objects to care for and research if that is the case, in fact no, the Asia collections have almost 20,000 objects, while the fine art department has around 3,000 objects, this only reiterates the peripheral importance the ethnographic collections were bestowed with in the formative years of the organisation. It has without a doubt affected our collecting processes and also the types of practice collected. The Fine Arts remain in the tight parameters of painting and sculpture, while decorative arts include the industrial arts, ceramics, textiles, glass and metalwork, the majority of which come from the urban art schools or industrialised urban practice. The ethnography collections predominately represent the rural, hereditary, 'pre-modern' traditional crafts, and where painting was collected it served to uphold the notion of the 'traditional' taking the form of Chinese calligraphy or Japanese printmaking. What the museum classification system promotes is the notion that only the urban educated can be included as a modern or contemporary artist within the fine art discipline, while the rural artist must stay within the boundaries of the pre-modern or traditional and is confined to the practice of ethnography.

To undermine this principle I'd like to introduce you to a contemporary sculptor who contravenes some of those boundaries.

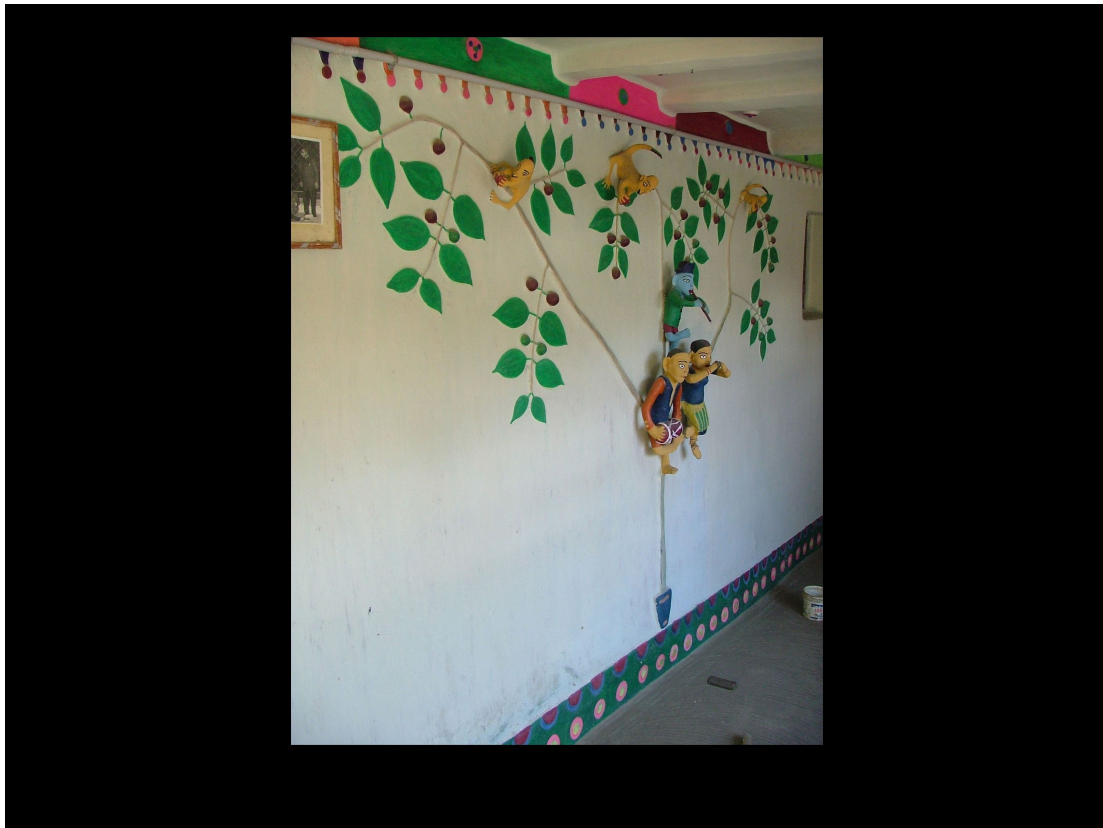


Sonabai Rajawar is a sculptor from Chattisgarh state in Central India.



[Sonabai – Krishna image]

Sonabai is in her early 80's now and has been creating vivid mythical and pastoral bas relief in her home since she was in her twenties. She was married at 15 to a widower, and for reasons Sonabai is not willing to divulge she was placed in isolation by her husband in their home on the edge of the village of Phuputra, in Sarguja. It is not the practice of Sonabai's community to place women in isolation, so Sonabai's situation although familiar for some women in India was exceptional for Sonabai and her community. For many years she had no female company, only her son and husband.



[Bas relief]

During the early years of her isolation she began creating bas relief sculptures populating her home with as she describes them 'friends' placing the young Sonabai in bustling dances of harvest and in scenes from the Hindi epics.



[Craft Museum, New Delhi]

Although Sonabai's work appears archetypal of women's art practice across India and other parts of South Asia, the extreme circumstances of her situation had in fact provided Sonabai with the inspiration to become an innovator.



[Local Phuputra decoration]

She took a practice that had been locally abstract and minimal in its use of colour to a new and very different level incorporating new techniques of construction,



[Partly finished panel]

developing new motifs personally connected to her life and situation and increasingly devising new colour palettes, which included chemically based pigments. This is not a woman working within the structure of hereditary practice, but is in fact an innovative artist developing her practice around her life experiences. Over time Sonabai did leave her home and others were able to visit her. This of course sparked an interest in her work, with younger women and men learning from Sonabai through government funded initiatives, developing their own style and practice.



[Bhagat Ram jali]

Although working within a particular genre, the sculptors she has trained with Sonabai have their own distinctive styles drawing on their own particular sources of inspiration, whether they are local or western. While the practice began through isolation the younger generation of artists are travelling throughout the state and in some cases nationally and internationally, drawing inspiration from the environments and practices they encounter.



[Image of Atma Das]

This is the work of Atma Das Manikpuri, a sculptor from the Sarguja area. As a young man he had thought of training at the regional art school, and using the reading list he familiarised himself with the work of 20th century European painters, particularly Picasso and Matisse. At some point he heard of Sonabai through a local paper and became increasingly interested in her work, spending time with her and studying under her. During this period of study he began developing his own style which in some instances drew on aspects of 20th century European painting and also the local landscape.



[Atma Das's elephant]

Although Atma Das work is clearly from the Sarguja area his work is individual and instantly recognisable as his own particular style. His combination of art school and artist-led training has produced a very distinct style of bas relief work in the Sarguja area.



[Compare mango pickers – Sonabai and Atma Das]

For me Sonabai, Atma Das and the many artists that radiate from this small community completely turn on its head the assumption that rural practice is a) hereditary, b) produced without inspiration or thought processes c) without innovation and d) done so anonymously. There is little difference here, apart from the surroundings and style to differentiate the work of the Sarguja area from other western art schools and movements of the 20th century. And these were some of the reasons I felt it was important to commission work from Sonabai for the NML collections, and in a way her work has been a marker for the policy changes that are currently taking place.

I think it would also be interesting at this point to briefly discuss the history of migratory practice between western and non western practices at about roughly the same period, the late 19th and early 20th century. Migratory practice has been seen in the West as the nexus of challenging, innovative and original thinking, the avant garde, and the modern/contemporary.



[Africa art case in World Cultures gallery]

A European artist's work was *inspired* by the work of the anonymous sculptor or carver from particularly Africa and the Pacific. However with the emergence of a new South Asian painting practice in the 20th century this same notion of inspiration taken by the modern and contemporary painters of South Asia is not seen by the West in the same context, it is instead often seen as copying or poorly imitating the genius of the Western art isms. A continuing perception that the art of South Asia is without its own original concepts, this is further reinforced by the disregarding of hereditary practices, which have fallen outside of the Western notions of modernism which are connected to progressive, technological advances. As Flores discusses in his paper *The Aesthetics of Anthropology*, 'there are many activities that lie on the margins of art and our decisions as to whether or not we choose to include them will

depend on personal prejudices we internalise from our experiences of western high art'. Western artists, curators and major arts organisations are still struggling with these concepts today and the need to classify the South Asian artist within a familiar colonial fine art/ethnographical context.



[Aranya printers]

On a recent visit to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka I was surprised to hear such terms as artisan being used by members of the group and also more interestingly the middle and upper class urban elites of those countries, who distanced themselves from the local practices of printers and dyers, practices often considered rural rather than urban. I was pleased to hear the director of Aranya, Ruby Ghuznavi, a company founded on natural dye and Bangladeshi design principles, state in strong terms that what was being created by Aranya was art, these were new forms of textiles. The printers and

block makers were reclaiming patterns discouraged by the English during the 19th century and remaking them in to original forms as a mark of Bangladeshi identity.



[Degree show images at Indus Valley]

As a group we struggled long and hard with the concept of what is art and what is craft, with confusion and frustration that the colonial/western paradigm did not fit when trying to place the western model on to urban South Asia, there was in fact little consideration of the rural in any of our discussions, with much searching for craft created through informed practice, which from a western perspective seemed to automatically rule out the rural. This was a trip of high and lows, but on my return I felt a renewed sense that a fundamental change must take place at NML in terms of its collecting and display policies particularly for the South Asia collections, the trip was a major impetus, but a

series of exhibitions and final outputs from earlier projects have galvanised me, including SHISHA's ArtSouthAsia programme of exhibitions, conferences and publications bringing together contemporary rural and urban practices from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India and earlier this year the 3rd Fukuoka triennale, from Japan, shown at various venues by Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery. The Arts Council visit, the ArtSouthAsia and the Blackburn shows have given me new ways of thinking about the meaning of contemporary in South Asia and the complexity of practice being developed.

So what of contemporary art practice in South Asia today, of course it is as complex and layered as it has ever been, the difference being today, that museums and museum curators involved in a variety of disciplines are starting to take note and explore the complexities of practice in South Asia. I'd like to introduce you two artists who epitomise migratory practice in South Asia and also within the wider Asia context, Adeela Suleman from Pakistan, and Wu Mali from Taiwan.

Both interest me greatly due to the multi faceted nature of their practice and pose something of a conundrum, when considering how they would fit into NML's outdated collection areas. They both illustrate the difficulties faced by museum curators looking to acquire pieces for distinct museum collections from artists who are exploring practice outside of the outmoded classification systems of fine art and ethnography.

Suleman's work is rooted and inspired by her personal experience of living and working in Pakistan and through her practice she looks to understand and comment on the realities of Pakistani culture and politics.



[Workshop sign]

I'm going to look in particular at a piece Suleman created for the 2nd Fukuoka triennale in 2002, entitled *Salma, Sitara and Sisters – Motorcycle Workshop*. In particular this work deals with the issues of nationality, class and gender through the common sight of women travelling on a motorcycle. This every day activity takes place in a unique way in Pakistan. Women sit on the motorcycle in a side saddle position with their husband driving; while both of them help each other to balance themselves and more often than not their children. This common sight gives an insight into the gender relations, looking at the way women sit on the motor cycle, class relations particularly the fact

that motor cycles are predominately used by the lower classes and lower middle classes and also the uniqueness of the Pakistani context.



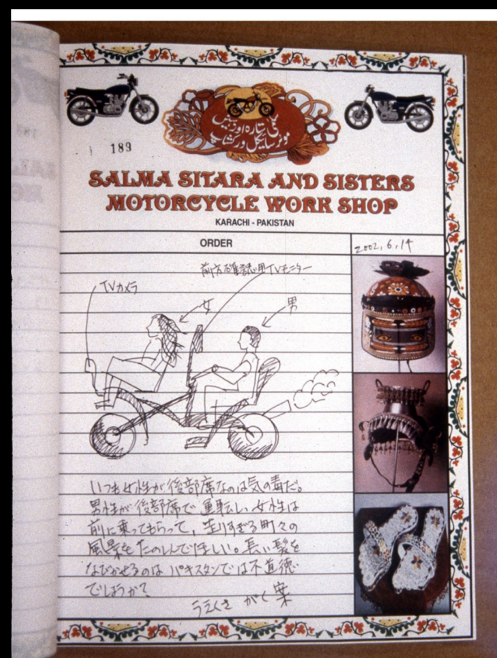
[Truck workshop]

Suleman takes on the male dominated space of the truck workshop creating a showcase of accessories and implements for the female motorcycle passenger.



"Salma, Sitara & Sisters Motorcycle Workshop" Installation View
Second Fukuka Asian Triennial Exhibition, Japan (2002)

[Installation shot]



"Salma, Sitara & Sisters Motorcycle Workshop" (2002)- Instruction Guide
Second Fukuka Asian Triennial Exhibition, Japan

[Work request book]

Offering a full service of custom designed pieces Suleman creates fantasy solutions for dealing with the gender imbalances placed on the woman as she rides in a side saddle position.



Detail (Motorcycle) - "Salma, Sitara & Sisters Motorcycle Workshop" Installation
Second Fukuka Asian Triennial Exhibition, Japan (2002)

[Close up of jacket, baby back pack and extra child seat]

Her work reflects a society where economic, social and gender inequalities are an everyday fact, by building a parallel universe she creates a situation tailored solely for women. Suleman incorporates found or everyday objects into her work, while also incorporating the skills and techniques of the craftsman working in an urban environment.



[Crash helmets]

When we met with Adeela she told us of the laughter that rang out through the real motorcycle workshop when she went to discuss her ideas with the men. They thought she was crazy, but over a period of time, she worked closely with the men to produce, some extremely practical but at the same time utterly fanciful pieces reflecting the visual language of her environment.



Detail - "Salma, Sitara & Sisters Motorcycle Workshop" (2002)
Second Fukuka Asian Triennial Exhibition, Japan

[Detail of work]



[Bus]



[Truck detail]

Through this installation Suleman addresses the complex nature and the practicalities of living in urban Pakistan. She examines the male-female relationship on the motorcycle, highlighting the closeness required of the situation and its variance from the social norms of Pakistani society.

As Salima Hashmi comments 'Suleman's work crosses many borders between fantasy and function, industrial production and craft and between the gender roles'.

In which defined collection area would Suleman's work best be placed at NML? Interestingly the Fine Art and Ethnology departments have discussed Suleman's work and the Fine Art department automatically assumed her work would be more closely associated with the ethnology collections, while for the

ethnology department although we are starting to widen and develop our collecting policy, we are still in the process of agreeing that this is what we should be collecting. Without a doubt artists such as Suleman will be in danger of being lost to museums such as NML unless the ingrained notion of what is fine art and what is ethnology is tackled.

Wu Mali's work is underpinned by a number of reoccurring issues, including the telling of hidden histories or narratives that may contradict or bring new perspectives to accepted national or world histories and the presentation of multiple perspectives relating to her chosen area of work.



[Installation]

Her recent installation, *Kuroshio* was part of the 3rd Fukuoka triennale, at the BBC Radio Lancashire building in Blackburn. Over a two-month period Wu

developed her project in the industrial sea port of Fukuoka. The area is tied by the sea to other areas of Asia, including Southeast Asia and Wu's homecountry Taiwan, with the area commonly known as Kuroshio. Wu chose to focus on the ocean, working with local communities and researchers to tease out the commonalities seeming divided nation states share through the use of the ocean. While Wu is most commonly defined as an installation artist, her work incorporates many aspects frequently used in the construction of ethnographies.





[Community members visiting shrine]

During the development of the project Wu collected and filmed aspects of the oceanic rituals and ceremonies that took place in the Kuroshio area and also worked with local people in the kuroshio area collecting oral histories and undertaking reminiscence sessions building a picture of the alternative histories lived by local people.

Wu also met with Mr Ishil Tadashi, a researcher of drifted articles, whose studies would also play an important part in Wu's final installation.



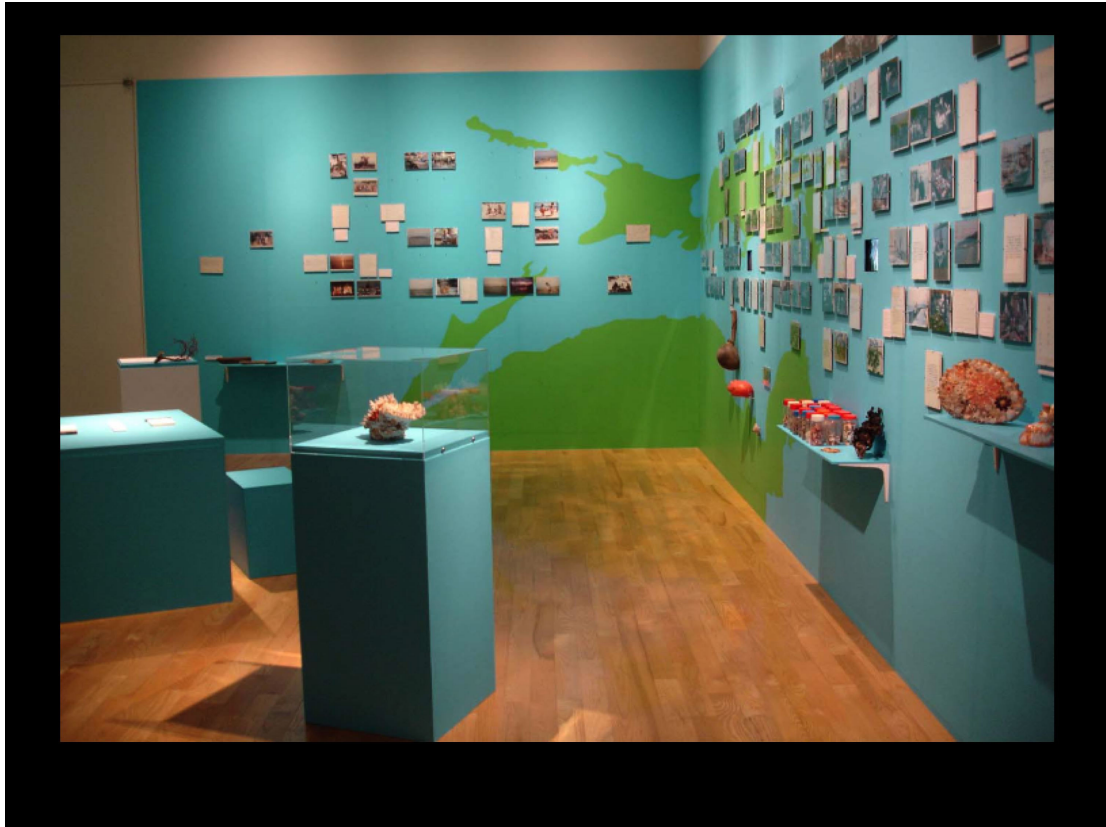
[Sea thought wall]

Kuroshio as an installation is a combination of myriad practices, providing the viewer with layers of meaning and perspectives. On entering the installation the viewer meets the powerful anthropological style films of the oceanic rituals which are countered by videos which show the retelling of personal and community histories of the ocean by the elders of the area.



[Sea thought wall]

Moving through the installation the viewer comes to what I will describe as a wall of sea-thoughts, where hundreds of postcards contain the thoughts, memories and significance of local Kuroshio residents and also the memories of Blackburn's communities, including drawings of the beach by small children or a short note remembering a shark attack.



[Detail of found objects]

Finally encased with museum labels is the result of Wu's work with Mr Tadashi, a case of well researched drifted objects, whose place of origin in the Kuroshio area has been retraced after being collected from the Fukuoka shore. Showing the unnoticed journeys made by cast off and forgotten objects across the ocean.

Using a mixture of traditionally defined fine art, ethnographic and also social history techniques Wu has combined objects, images and written narratives, she succeeds in turning 'the exhibition space into a communicative one in which endless dialogues can be carried on like waves in the ocean'.

A further interesting development in the case of the Blackburn installation has been the revealing of local hidden histories relating to Blackburn's South

Asian communities. Wu was able to reveal information that a dedicated South Asia outreach officer could not, it is difficult to know whether this relates to her status as an artist, or merely due to the fact that she is from Taiwan and not South Asian, but it raises further questions regarding the practice used to 'rediscover' lost or hidden community histories and highlights the significant role artists can play in this area.

So bearing in mind the collection histories and artists I have just discussed how can museums breakdown the inherent colonial legacies of its collecting practices and develop new ways of collecting and representing 21st century art practices, particularly in relation to cross border or migratory practice. It can be a difficult step to make. It is often problematic gaining support for new directions in collection development, organisational support is often forthcoming when there are clear links to the historical strengths of a collections, but it is invariably more difficult to justify when there are no internal precedents for such a move, as new approaches can be seen as pandering to a particular curators personal interests and are often viewed with suspicion. Without such precedents it is also often more difficult to find funding and other resources.

One of the first initiatives in the ethnology department has been to remove the curator from the decision making role, and essentially handing over the curatorial role to external South Asian organisations. Developing international partnerships is high on NML's agenda and although joint exhibition and events programming are becoming more and more part of the museum's

practice the actual building of permanent collections has not been part of that collaborative process.

During an outsider art conference in Chandigarh last year I met Minhazz Majumder. She is responsible for the development of The Earth and Grass workshop, a crafts development agency working with artists across central and east India.



[Image of Minhazz with Montu and Joba Chitrakar with their daughter Sona]

Since that chance meeting we've discussed ways in which we can bring new perspectives to the South Asia collections at Liverpool, which by the way consist mainly of arms and armour, and temple related pieces. Using the NML purchase fund I applied for a pilot collecting project, which would involve NML funding the collecting activities of The Earth and Grass Workshop. The only

stipulation would be that there should be a good representation of women artists, as female artists are very poorly represented throughout the Asian collections. The Earth and Grass Workshop will however be responsible for choosing artists who they think should be in the collection, and we hope that the new commissioned works that will begin to enter the collection at the end of the year will begin to challenge NML's representation of South Asia.

I suppose there is a tenuous link here to the idea of migratory practice as the curator is handing over the curatorial practice to an external organisation not usually involved in the process of curating. It is the first of a number of partnership initiatives that we hope to develop at NML and although this partnership will focus on rural practice, we also intend to develop relationships with art institutions that reflect urban contemporary practice. As you will know museum years are slightly longer than in the real world, so this will take some time to develop, but the impetus is there as is the support, which is half the battle.

Also following the Arts Council visit the departments of ethnology, decorative arts and fine arts have begun to meet to share information on artists across Asia, which is widening perspectives and understanding. For example none of us had been aware of exactly what our collecting remits were and it is obvious that particular areas have been ignored because as individuals we presumed it would be the responsibility of one of the other departments. We are starting to find that there are definite areas of cross over particularly at this stage with artists working in glass, and also jewellery. It is clear that residency

programmes will initially play a large part in breaking down departmental barriers, particularly as World Museum does not have a track record in facilitating residency programmes and will need to work closely with the fine art department to ensure we make a success of the programme.

Still to be resolved is the question of where artists such as Sonabai/Adeela/Mali, should 'sit' within the organisation's collection departments. The obvious answer is to place collections where the specialism lies and also more importantly where policies are in place to support the developments. A longer term prospect is to rename collection areas, making them more flexible in their collecting focus. Do we rename departments geographically moving to Britain or Europe, Asia, Africa, etc, which would remove the loaded term 'ethnology'? Or do we focus on practice using the classifications of painting, sculpture and textiles? Neither are satisfactory and we need to look at more inventive ways of classifying or declassifying our collections. Of course, whatever we choose to do there would be uncomfortable bed fellows juxtaposing spear collections from Northeast India with for example a Wu Mai installation, but if these questions aren't raised, we could spend another 150 years collecting to type. We cannot wipe the slate clean but we can acknowledge what has been unconsciously upheld in the past and move on. By doing so would create equity between the individual departments, creating a more balanced approach to resources and research.

So in conclusion the effects of migratory practice could and should have massive implications for museum curatorial practice, opening new dialogues

and raising questions about collecting practices and the self imposed parameters we still allow ourselves to work within. It is an interesting area that from a museum perspective is only just beginning to be explored.